

Political Ethics in San Diego; an Oxymoron?

By John Nienstedt

Scandal, Scandal Everywhere

Remember strippergate? Ah, those were the good 'ol days when San Diego had only one political scandal to worry about. Now a Congressman has resigned in humiliation after taking huge bribes; members of the City's Pension Board are facing trial; the city's finances are under review by the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the strippergate trial put one Councilman and a lobbyist in jail. This is a textbook case of political turmoil on a local level.

As it turns out, back when strippergate was a breaking story in June 2003, most County residents already felt ethics among politicians had reached crisis proportions. Then, 56% believed things had hit crisis proportions. Now that figure has edged up significantly to 63% and is much higher in the north San Diego City portion of the County where residents have endured a double whammy of disgrace at the local and federal levels. Despite the litany of political woes, San Diego city residents generally claim their politics and government are no more corrupt than other similar-sized cities. Only one-in-five residents believe the City is more corrupt than others while 8% maintain that politics here are actually *less* crooked than other cities.

Digging to a more personal level, the survey finds that a slim majority of County residents feel politicians and elected officials are less honest than the average person, though 43% rate them just as trustworthy as the average joe. Finally, residents tend to equivocate when it comes to assigning blame for political corruption. "Is it the political system that tends to corrupt people who were initially law-abiding or is it that some politicians simply start out being corrupt," we asked. Though more finger the political system (49%) than the individual (43%) as the culprit, views tend to be less certain on

this point, indicating a substantial amount of gray area.

Epic Ethical Crisis?

While the notion that local politics are in crisis mode has ratcheted up since 2003, one could argue that the public is not in a frenzy about it. In fact, the percentage saying ethics are in an “extreme” crisis has remained stable at about 13%. The real change has been in the “serious” category which jumped from 18% in June of 2003 to 31% currently.

It should be noted that the poll used a split sample approach to test whether being referred to as a “politician” is any better or worse than being referred to as an “elected official.” Office-holders were referred to as “elected officials” during the interview for half the respondents and “politicians” for the other half. While 66% see an ethics crisis among elected officials, 74% believe there is an ethics crisis among politicians showing that, indeed, the “elected official” label is more appealing.

The poll also shows that, when talking about ethics in politics, it clearly matters whether you are talking to a registered voter or not. As we have seen in other KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Polls, there is a wide divergence between the two groups. On one hand, some might propose the hypothesis that registered voters would be *less* likely than non-registrants to see a crisis of political ethics. The argument goes that registrants have bought into the political system while non-registrants opt out of it because they distrust pols and the system to begin with. This turns out not to be the case. In fact, while 63% of registered voters see a crisis of ethics on the part of elected officials/politicians a paltry 31% of non-registrants agree! What is occurring is that non-registrants block out politically-related news and tend to ignore politics in general.

Another finding is that the level of concern about ethics varies by area. City residents are more likely to point to an ethical crisis. But, as alluded to earlier, residents in the

North San Diego City area have gotten the worst of it. Seventy-two percent in this region – which contains a large portion of former Representative Duke Cunningham’s Congressional District – rate political ethics as a crisis and 20% say it has reached extreme levels. Interestingly, the North Coastal and North Suburban corridors (other areas which include wide swaths of the 50th Congressional District) are not too worked up about political ethics. Around half in those two regions see a crisis and about half as many as in the North City portion call it extreme.

Older people tend to see an ethical crisis in politics much more often than younger people and they tend to rate that crisis as more severe. A mere 28% of adults under the age of 35 see a crisis. That figure explodes from there: it’s 62% among 35 to 44 year-olds and 67% among those in the 45 to 54 year age bracket. Even when voter registration is taken into account, there is still a strong relationship between age and whether someone senses an ethics crisis.

The survey also shows that lower income residents are a bit less likely to see a crisis. About 40% of those earning less than \$40,000 annually rate political ethics as a crisis. This is probably related to lower income individuals generally having less access to media and news.

Finally, the survey did find that Democrats are more likely to feel that ethical lapses have risen to crisis proportions. While the differences between Democrats and others are not stark, 10% more Democrats perceive a crisis, and they generally cast it as more severe than non-Democrats. Since local troubles tend to involve more Democrats than Republicans, this is likely revolves around recent Bush administration and Republican Congressional problems. Such a finding suggests that, even in a city with local problems, it is the national ones that capture the attention, fire people up and take the crisis to a higher level.

America's Most Corrupt City? Hardly, Say San Diegans

Most city residents believe that San Diego is about as corrupt as the next city. Should this be taken as a sober realization that this once squeaky clean burg is now nothing special when it comes to political ethics? Or are folks taking the head-in-the-sand approach and not facing up to San Diego's big city problems? There is no way to answer these questions from the results, but it is clear San Diegans are not maintaining a holier-than-thou attitude.

In spite of finding earlier that Democrats are inclined to cast the situation as more severe, within the city of San Diego, it is Republicans who tab the city as more corrupt. The differences here are slight but they suggest that it is easier to find fault when someone else's party is being investigated.

Diogenes Call Your Office

Perhaps the fabled Greek Diogenes' problem was that he went searching amongst politicians. Ninety-seven percent of County residents don't believe politicians or elected officials are more honest than the average person. As noted, most think the people they vote for are less honest than they themselves and one-quarter say they are much less honest. Clearly, many take a dim view of the type of person attracted to politics.

Interestingly, we did not find a significant statistical difference between "elected officials" and "politicians" on the question of honesty. Despite the latter being viewed as slightly less honest, the results could well be due to chance variation in the data.

What we do find is that women are much harder on our representatives than men are, Democrats tend to find more fault than Republicans do, and whites tend to be less harsh than others. While half of County males think politicians/elected officials are just

as honest as you and I, only 42% of women believe the same. Further, 58% of women believe office holders are less honest while only 44% of men feel the same way. Since far more men than women hold elective positions (though that is changing), this could be another instance where it is easier to find fault amongst “the other.” The reverse could easily be true as well. That is, men may be defensive about their position as elected representatives.

Well over 60% of Democrats believe that politicians/elected officials are less honest than the average person with 31% of self-labeled “strong Democrats” saying representatives are much less honest. In contrast, about 45% of non-Democrats believe politicians/elected officials possess an honesty deficit. Do Democrats have higher standards? Or is this a transitory situation brought on by recent Republican scandals?

Nearly half the white residents see politicians/elected officials as just as honest as the next person while only 22% of African-Americans come to the same conclusion. Generally, non-whites tend to view elected representatives as less honest. This racial component adds fuel to the argument that those out of power tend to see those in power as less honest and that those in power may tend to “look the other way” or rationalize bad behavior.

Finally, we note that residents in the South Suburbs (Chula Vista, Coronado, Imperial Beach, National City and San Ysidro) are significantly more likely to say politicians/elected officials are less honest than the average person. While it is unclear why this is the case (after all, this seems to be one of the County’s untainted areas), 65% say representatives are less honest (43% *much less*). It is interesting that residents in the North City area, previously identified as far more sensitive to ethical lapses, do not regard elected officials as any less honest than other regions in the County.

Is it Politics or the Person that Corrupts?

Residents certainly come down on both sides of this question, but on balance, more (by 6%) blame the system than the individual for the corruption. There are very few significant differences here, but two that did surface are the findings that independents blame the system more often than those who are members of major parties. This reflects the suspicion independents hold of the political process (part of which is the party system itself). Independents elevate the individual while strong partisans on both sides tend to believe in the political system. Therefore Democrats and Republicans are more likely to believe the individual caught up in corruption was a bad apple to begin with.

Interestingly, older folks tend to side with the independents on this one and focus more blame on the system rather than the individual. At the other end of the age spectrum, those in the 18 to 24 year category exhibit faith in the system and tend to blame the individual. Though it is impossible to know, older folks may argue that this could reflect that it takes time for the political system to corrupt an individual and that insufficient time has passed for younger adults.

Conclusion

San Diego has certainly seen its share of scandal recently. The current poll suggests political ethics has moved up another notch on the crisis scale. Still, few residents view the situation as an extreme crisis. Even most voters do not consider the current problems to be a “serious” crisis. The inference is that this is a problem that should pass in due time and is not endemic – and certainly not unique – to San Diego. Indeed a recent national Associated Press-Ipsos poll shows 88% say political corruption is a serious problem.

On the point of uniqueness, it would be interesting to see how San Diegans would have compared their city to others say ten, twenty or fifty years ago. We do not have that data, but today's results show that if we ever enjoyed a feeling of political cleanliness, it is now history.

The survey is replete with somewhat disturbing findings of either jealousy manifested as finger-pointing on one hand, or defensiveness and rationalization on the other. Women tend to see politicians (usually male) as less honest than average. Republicans are less inclined to see politicians in general as ethically-challenged . . . except when it comes to corruption in the City of San Diego, where all three recently indicted Councilmen happened to be Democrats. Non-whites tend to perceive more dishonesty in a white dominated government while whites are less likely to see a problem.

About the only situation where we find the "out class" with a more positive view than the "in class" is among those not registered to vote. The findings here continue the theme, present in earlier KPBS/Competitive Edge Research surveys that voting and, in turn, not voting says volumes about a person. One could cynically argue that the best way to insinuate a more ethical political climate is for people to tune out the news and drop out of civic life. Actually, that appears to be what non-registrants are doing. Faced with the contradictions and heartbreak associated with politics, they literally ignore it. Voters are left to sort out the messy details. Locally, those details have gotten a bit messier.